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TAGS: [PGOV PHUM PREF PREL VM IT HUMAN RIGHTS](#)

SUBJECT: ITALY: VIETNAMESE AMBASSADOR CALLED IN ON CENTRAL HIGHLANDS UNREST

REF: SECSTATE 82712

Classified By: A/POL M/C Gary Robbins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary. Italy responded quickly to the recent crackdown in Vietnam by summoning the Vietnamese Ambassador and stressing that all rights be respected and that international access be granted to the Central Highlands region. Ambassador Thu Le Vinh confirmed to MFA Deputy Director General for Asia, Ignazio Di Pace and MFA South East Asia Office Director, Marco della Seta that there had been clashes between protesters and police but that there were no casualties and order was restored by April 13th. Missionary sources also reported that calm was restored after a few thousand people, protesting against religious repression and land issues, clashed with authorities. In response to media attention, the Embassy of Vietnam released a press statement on April 14. See paragraph 6 for full text of statement. End summary.

2. (C) The MFA summoned Vietnamese Ambassador to Italy, Thu Le Vinh on April 13 to express the Italian government's concern over the weekend crackdown on protesters in the Central Highlands. MFA officials stressed to Ambassador Thu Le Vinh that all rights be respected in full and that access to the region be granted in order to allow for international monitoring of the situation. The MFA also instructed the Italian Ambassador in Phnom Penh to demarche the Cambodian government not to obstruct the entry of Vietnamese Montagnard refugees into Cambodia.

3. (C) Della Seta, confirmed that the Government of Vietnam (GVN) cracked down on weekend protests in the Central Highlands and sealed off the region to all air traffic and foreign nationals. Della Seta said that Ambassador Thu Le Vinh confirmed the events and stated that the authorities confronted the protesters only after they had encircled and damaged a provincial administration building. Ambassador Thu Le Vinh reported that there were approximately a dozen arrests and no casualties, and that order was restored by April 13.

4. (C) According to della Seta, missionary sources reported that there were a few thousand protesters in different areas of the region demonstrating against religious repression and land issues. He noted that it was not coincidental that the protests occurred over Easter since the government bans many religious ceremonies. These sources also confirmed that calm had returned by April 13 but did not report on arrests or casualties. Della Seta expects that, due to the number of protesters spread out over the area, the numbers reported by the Vietnamese Ambassador may be inaccurate.

5. (C) Della Seta expressed interest in working closely with post to gather more information on the events and asked about rumors that U.S. NGO's were involved in promoting the protests. PolOff thanked della Seta for the information and assured him that post would continue sharing information. Comment. Italy's quick reaction to this problem offers us a willing partner within the EU if the Department is contemplating further actions. End comment.

6. (U) Text of press statement follows:

Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam  
PRESS STATEMENT

Allegations, largely promoted by the Italian Radical Party, are currently circulating within the Italian political community and in the Italian public media that last weekend thousands of Christian Montagnards in the Central Highlands of Vietnam participated in demonstrations against the Government for having burned down their churches, forcing them to conduct Easter prayers outside, and requesting the protection of their fundamental rights, and that the Vietnamese Government had ordered a tough repression against the demonstrators, causing more than 400 deaths.

Faced with such unreliable information, the Embassy of Vietnam in Italy is authorized to declare as follows:

1. We categorically deny the information provided principally by the Radical Party and reported in the Italian public media and declare that this information was totally

false and unfounded. The fact is that last weekend, in some parts of the Dak Lak and Gia Lai provinces in the Central Highlands, a few hundred persons of various ethnic minorities, and not only Christian Montagnards as it was alleged, demonstrated against the irregularities and errors by the local authorities while exercising their official powers, in particular on the use of arable land. Most of the demonstrators, after having received assurances from the local authorities of a speedy remedy for the errors and irregularities, withdrew, returning to their homes. However, some unyielding groups attacked, occupied, and destroyed some local authority seats and intentionally provoked a clash with public order forces, causing a number of wounded on both sides. Some of the wilder demonstrators, who were directly responsible for the clashes and disorders, were stopped by the public order forces, but there were no casualties. After the clashes, living conditions in the venues above returned to normal and we hope that the region can soon be visited once more by foreign tourists and the foreign press.

2. Full respect of the fundamental rights of individuals and ethnic groups is the basis for the policy of national solidarity of the Communist Party and the Government of Vietnam. All the ethnic groups, including the minorities, are treated equally. The right to preserve and develop their culture and traditions, as well as their religious beliefs and the other fundamental rights of every ethnic group are guaranteed and sanctioned by the State Constitution. Currently, 54 ethnic groups coexist peacefully in Vietnam, tied by liens of brotherhood and mutual respect. There are also 6 main religions, including the Christian religion, with about 6 million followers. In the Central Highlands as in the rest of Vietnam, Christians, Protestants, Buddhists, etc., can freely exercise their religion in their places of worship and have good relations of cooperation with the local authorities. During the recent Easter Holidays, masses and common prayers were organized in all the churches in Vietnam, including in the Central Highlands. The encouraging results Vietnam has recently obtained in this sector were fully recognized by the great majority of the countries in the world, the many non-governmental international organizations, including those that have been working in Vietnam for a long time, and by the UN Organizations. Certainly, the country's legal and administrative system is not yet perfect and must be improved further; in the social lives of populations there still are cases of injustice and disparity that must be eliminated step by step, but to state that the Government of Vietnam violated human rights by tolerating the destruction of places of worship and the repression of persons who asked for the respect of their individual rights is simply absurd and unacceptable. There are forces that are hostile to Vietnam and that have been trying for some time to take advantage of the backwardness of the mountain regions, in particular in the Central Highlands, and of the low level of instruction of the local populations to foster disorder and instigate people in the ethnic minorities to rebel and flee illegally abroad, with the intent of destroying Vietnam's national unity, provoking political and social instability in the region, and damaging Vietnam's image and international prestige. This dark design will be combated in a decided manner by the people of Vietnam and is destined to fail completely. With the cooperation and support of the international community, Vietnam will make further effort to consolidate national solidarity and integrity, improve further the fundamental sectors of the lives of its people, and preserve and increase further its international prestige.

Rome, April 14, 2004  
Press Office  
Embassy of Vietnam

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